

# “BEHIND EVERY

Military sociology is a relatively unexplored area in Australian research. Literature on the topic of military base-host community relations in specific is practically non-existent, in Australia and elsewhere. Those case-studies which have been made (Barth, 1952; Hunter, 1952; Palmer, 1977) reveal that the military community represents a kind of foreign settlement in a civilian locality, that relations more often than not are uneasy and even exploitative in such matters as housing, and that the military style of life in general thwarts civil-military social integration.

The communal nature of the military organisation in its own right has been noted by Kilmartin (1974: 444):

**“Military organisation may be thought of as communities in two senses: spatial and psychological. The latter means simply the affective bonds between members which occur as a result of common experiences, common goals and, in some cases, public antipathy or indifference ... The second sense in which military organisations are communal is in the form of more visible, spatial communities such as those residential communities on or near service bases and in barracks and training camps... These physical arrangements symbolize the relative impermeability of the (civil-military) boundaries — from either side.”**

**How the wives and families of servicemen experience service lifestyle, military communalism and isolation from civilian host communities is the concern of this paper.**

This paper is based on data drawn from a study made by the author of the Australian Army base at Albury-Wodonga and its relationships with the civilian host community (Palmer, 1977). Generalisation to the wider military community is possible.

## **Marital Relationships and Children's Education**

Traditionally, a serviceman's life has not been family orientated. Households are regularly unsettled by postings, delays in being assigned married quarters and the expenses of setting up independent living arrangements, and periods when the married serviceman is away on short term courses, temporary detachment, or training exercises.

Marital relationships and children's education are commonly thought to suffer as a result of these disruptions, although studies tend to refute this belief. Little research has been conducted on the effect of periodic separations on military family stability. However, in possibly the most balanced judgement, Boulding (1950) concludes that prolonged separation has its most adverse effect on families where there are already other indications of instability. While extended absences of husbands and fathers in military households certainly presents marital problems, Boulding states that by itself this is not a sufficient explanation for familial strain.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, with respect to the effect of posting turbulence on children's education, Australian Army investigations (Bourke and Naylor, 1971; Mackay and Spicer, 1976) have found little significant difference between the achievements of mobile and non-mobile students. A report by Bourke and Naylor (1971: 131) concludes that:

“The wide variety of other factors which impinge upon the child in the school and the home situations are more than adequate, in most cases, to mask the effects on school achievement of the individual factors including change of school.”

## **Authoritarian Tendencies**

Beyond his educational achievement, however, it is the army child's home situation which is often considered suspect by outside observers. Illustrative of this concern are the following comments, taken from interviews the author conducted with a social worker and a teacher involved in counselling at a local school:

“The army is a totally unnatural life. The soldier feels obliged to be scary. I mean, their discipline style just becomes a habit.”

“The biggest problem of an army kid is that the father's got a pretty secure sort of life. He's used to being disciplined, or the discipliner. So he finds it pretty hard to relate to life on the outside and in some cases finds it hard to relate to the kids, who are used to more freedom.”

In part these comments reflect a belief that the highly authoritarian setting of military life fosters authoritarian personality tendencies, i.e. strengthens predispositions to dominate others of lower status arbitrarily, and simultaneously to submit to arbitrary higher authority. Again, there are studies which tend to refute this popular belief.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, studies by Campbell and McCormack (1957) and Roghmann (1972) suggest that military experience can at times reduce authoritarianism.

The consequences for army family relationships of any authoritarian tendencies among servicemen is also unclear. For example, other civilian interviewees gave a different perspective of the army parent:

“Tensions do arise from the obvious disparity in authority styles inside and outside the army, but I can point to examples where the guy goes all out to be a good father, perhaps because he feels guilty about being away so often.” (a welfare officer)

“Army personnel are often quite family-minded, perhaps because they move so often and are thus more dependent on family ties.” (a minister)

The “corps first, family second” attitude of military authority does not help family relationships, however; and “My God, the corps always did come first”, exhorted the wife of a retired officer. Another army wife explained it thus:

“It's a man's world the army. Men are considered strange if they place their families ahead of the job. It's difficult for a girl who's gone in expecting a bed of roses.”

# GOOD SOLDIER. . .”

## Links with the Civilian Host Community

Very few army wives appear to be involved in organisations that bring them in close contact with civilians in the host community. Perceiving themselves as transients in the community, army wives naturally enough seem more likely to identify with others in similar situations rather than develop contacts of any depth with more permanent local residents. This insularity is further encouraged by the extended family nature of the military, whereby a family moving into an area is almost certain to know, seek out and focus their new social network, initially at least, upon army families remembered from previous postings.

Particularly when the social orientation of her husband is military (e.g. a patron of the mess), it is difficult for the army wife not to eventually become like him, until

This paper focuses on the army lifestyle and civil-military relations as experienced by the wives and families of Australian servicemen. It describes some of the norms of service life and the role conflicts that can emerge between family, profession, and community membership.

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there is almost total exclusion of the outside civilian society.

Civilian stereotyping of what is "typical army" also hinders inclusion of the military family into the host community. Descriptions of army wives range from "the blue rinse set" and "fish and chip girls", to the "quiet, inadequate ones" who "don't mind being bossed around". Images of this sort are normally of the wives of lower



ranking personnel. Less rank discrimination was shown by the local citizen who suggested that:

"The somewhat bizarre social-sex lives of army camp wives make them socially risky to know."

Such generalisations by civilians is a constant source of irritation for many army wives. Some believe a different code of behaviour to civilians is expected of them.

### **Status Consciousness**

Janowitz (1960; 188) claims that the wives of officers contribute to professional solidarity by weakening the artificial barriers generated by the rank system. He gives an example of where the wife calls the ranking officer by his name, while her husband must address him by rank. In the opinion of this writer, any weakening is at surface level only and the process certainly does not extend to the attitudes of many wives of lower ranking servicemen. The status associated with military rank merely supplements social distinctions already operating due to the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of army wives. Among officer's wives, for example, there is a clear jump in prestige for those whose husbands are Duntroon graduates over those whose husbands are Portsea graduates. Moreover, the difference is often substantive, a general observation being that a Duntroon graduate is more likely to marry a tertiary educated girl, a Portsea graduate a High School girl.

A number of factors appear to underscore the status consciousness of army wives. Considerations of discipline are involved:

"Officers wouldn't want them (their wives) to be too involved with lower rank's wives because he would then feel he has to treat the husband with favour."

A retired Colonel put the matter in another perspective when explaining the normal practice of allocating different housing areas for different ranks:

"You can't discipline a bloke in the morning and have his wife not talking to you over the fence in the afternoon."

One consequence is that few army families maintain close relations once its servicemember has been promoted to a higher rank. Friendship circles therefore tend to become more and more narrowly defined as the man works his way toward the top

of the hierarchy. This is not to say that purposeful rank exclusion in social relationships is practised only by the upwardly mobile serviceman and wife; the wife of the Colonel mentioned above has a neighbour who won't talk to her "because she's a Sergeant's wife."

What is considered deviant behaviour within the military community itself also seems to vary according to rank. In the words of an officer's wife:

"It is often accepted for an officer's wife to have an affair or be an alcoholic, but if it's a private's wife, she's a slut. Again it comes back to the adage that the officer is God."

Knowledge of an officer's familial problems tends to be concealed, or at least kept within peer groups; those of other ranks seem to more easily become the subject of common gossip. Nor does the extended family nature of the military help to forget past events:

"There's always someone who knows about what the guy or his wife has done in the past, no matter where he is shifted."

### **Pressures to Conform**

For the wives of servicemen of all ranks, however, conformity is the key word if they want to help their husband's military career. Stating the situation plainly, an officer's wife explains:

"They have these confidential reports, and if you have a bad one you're finished. So pressure is always on the officer, and pressure is transferred from the officer to the wife."

The case of the retired Colonel's wife is a prime example. Cathy began to take an active interest in controversial community issues only during the final years of her husband's career. Even then, wanting desperately to march in the anti-Vietnam demonstrations, she "wouldn't for Jim's sake"; wanted to become an ALP member, but was "advised not to because it would go into Jim's ASIO file;" knew it quite respectable to be in the Country Women's Association, but on joining the Women's Electoral Lobby was "still not prepared to be over-active because of Jim's consideration"; has tried to involve a few younger wives in such things as the Albury Community Centre and Women's Refuge, but when not finding apathy has found a fear of losing acceptability in the eyes

of both the military and the local civilian community. One army wife who did respond:

"...made things very difficult for her husband. She was virtually run out of town for stirring things up. I had a letter from her later pouring out all her troubles, and I remember — because I felt so much the same way — she concluded: 'how I wish I could be myself.'"

Summing the situation, Cathy said: "They just won't accept wives as individuals, and I think this goes right through the services."

Cathy also resented constantly being introduced as "the Colonel's wife". She believes that only in the city is there any real chance, because of the relative anonymity obtainable there, for an army wife to relax and "act more as a civilian".

Whether reflecting movements in the wider society or stemming from within the military community itself, there are, nevertheless, signs of improvement in the position of the army wife. There is a growing tendency, especially among better educated and skilled army wives, not to accept their situation to the extent previously known. For example, it is no longer uncommon to find an army wife deciding not to accompany her husband to a new posting, preferring to retain the job she began during a previous appointment or to simply establish a permanent household for their children during the final years of schooling. Increasingly finding employment on their own accord, some army wives are now in a better position to encourage the husband to leave the service and seek a post-retirement civilian job earlier than was once usual. Working has also enabled the army wife to assimilate into the civilian community better, orientating her away from the "chook house" that one army wife described an army camp as being.

### **Rank and Role Expectations**

The pressures to conform and be non-controversial create sufficient strain of themselves for the serviceman's family. Another frequent source of stress arises when wives take the responsibility for their husband's advancement onto their own shoulders, or when they do not progress in line with him. For example, a senior officer pointed out, not unkindly:

"Some soldiers outgrow their

wives, and when she drops behind either she pulls him down or he keeps going and leaves her behind. It is easy to see disparity at social functions."

Strain is further engendered by way of the fact that as a husband advances into the higher ranks the wife traditionally has also been expected to assume more responsibility in military community affairs. This responsibility may range from being a patron or executive member of an army wives' association to the assumption of a welfare concern for other army wives.

Finally, the solidarity of virtually an all male fraternity has its unfortunate

side in exacerbating pressures that already exist in civilian society. Australian concepts of mateship are enshrined in the exaggerated masculinity of the army life,<sup>3</sup> to the detriment of the family. Taft (1962: 195) has identified the role of women in this Australian "institution of mateship" to be:

"Mother ... monarch of the home domain where she both dominates and nurtures her husband and children — when they choose to come home from their independent outings."

The expectations evident in the following, by no means uncommon

viewpoint of an officer, almost echo Taft's caricature:

"The wife's duty is to manage the household, and it is a big job. So many of these blokes marry young to girls who don't know how to handle housekeeping. The army bloke is disciplined and expects the same at home."

On the man himself there are the usual pressures:

"If you don't smoke and drink you're a homosexual."

Perhaps to be expected, alcohol is said to constantly emerge as a factor in family problems. It was rated by several senior officers as the biggest single problem in the army.

## Conclusions

In the "old army", occupation and family life were closely linked. The realities of the profession pervaded family and social life and, in turn, the military community was comprehensively organised to assist family relations.

In recent years various factors have loosened this internal cohesiveness of the military community, including greater civilian contact through dispersal of army homes throughout civilian host communities; changing expectations both inside and outside the military of its role and organisation; civilian employment of army wives; and changing attitudes to

the role of women in society in general. The result is an increasingly uneasy juxtaposition of familial, occupational, and neighbouring related roles.

While the army has recently taken positive steps to alleviate a number of problem areas, notably housing,<sup>4</sup> overall the service remains deficient in recognising and tackling the needs of army families. Rarely are professional welfare people stationed at bases. Regimental officers continue to assume a father-confessor role, but they can hardly replace trained welfare staff. Too easily and too often it seems considerations of what will give the army a bad name influence their

involvement and the advice they give, quite apart from a persistent belief that the job should be placed ahead of the family. Moreover, moral judgements are rife, for instance de facto relationships are only just beginning to be recognised.

To have officer's wives responsible for other army wives represents at best an amateurish attempt at a companionate style of family organisation. As suggested earlier, it frequently creates further problems of its own for the women involved. The military community is too large, too mobile, and too obviously stratified to rely on voluntary mutual self-help.

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#### Footnotes

1 In another study dealing with military families, this time in the Strategic Air Command (SAC) wing of the U.S. Air Force, Ruth Lindquist (1952) is more forthright in emphasizing the strains placed on families by the frequent absences of husbands. Factors endangering the permanence of marriage included the fear of extramarital philandering by one or both partners; the SAC work situation fostering matriarchal families; and the excessive reliance of the SAC wife on her parental family for emotional support and protective functions.

2 Three separate studies of army, air force and marine corps recruits have found no statistically significant increase in authoritarian traits over the period of basic training; see Christie (1952), Franch and Ernest (1955), and Firestone (1959). Whether "authoritarian personalities" seek out a military career in the first place is a relevant question to ask however.

3 Aspects of mateship in the Australian Army are discussed by Ross (1973). The issue of masculine identity in the armed forces is considered by Elkin (1946); also Moskoi (1970: 154-55)

4 Recommendations in the 1975 Senate Committee Report (titled *The Australian Army*) for a greater concentration of army establishments along the eastern seaboard would also appear to offer prospects for fewer household shifts with each new posting and hence less family disruption. It would also minimise experiencing the pervasive military atmosphere of those army camps more remote from major civilian population concentrations.

# CHILDREN'S

## An

As a contribution to the International Year of the Child, an International Colloquium in School Psychology adopted a Declaration of the Psychological Rights of the Child in July, 1979. Here is the declaration:

#### **A Child has a Right to Love and Freedom from Fear:**

- ... to love, affection and understanding
- ... to freedom from fear of psychological and physical harm or abuse
- ... to protection and advocacy.

#### **Personal, Spiritual and Social Development:**

- ... to personal identity and independence and the freedom to express these
- ... to opportunities for spiritual and moral development
- ... to satisfying interpersonal relationships and responsible group membership.

#### **Education and Play**

- ... to formal and informal education and any necessary special resources
- ... to full opportunity for play, recreation and fantasy
- ... to optimum physical and psychological development and encouragement towards this.

This Declaration derived from a draft statement of children's psychological rights which the International School Psychology Committee drew up in 1978 and from the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, published in 1959. If such declarations are to have any thrust, the people who work with children need to be aware of them, to endorse their principles, and to be prepared to implement what they recommend, in policies and in practice.

Takanashi (1978) pointed out that the action concerning children's rights reflects changing conceptions of childhood. She repeated views expressed by previous writers (historians, social analysts, reformers) that it is only in the past century that childhood has been widely recognised as a period of life worth studying in its own right, and that children's vulnerability has been interpreted in terms of social obligations and individual adult responsibilities towards them. Adults' and society's responsibilities towards children were conceived as encompassing health, education, play, justice and positive affective experience — "tender loving care".

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